

A man is in a body of water, looking back over his shoulder. He is holding onto a makeshift raft made of logs. On the raft is a large, olive-green tactical backpack and some other gear. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding environment.

Getting SERE-ious

Learning to survive means overcoming all odds

Story and photos by Staff Sgt. Matthew Rosine

Looking back to find his way, Staff Sgt. Matthew Zimmer pulls a makeshift raft holding his gear across a frigid pond in the Colville National Forest, Wash. He and his teammate, Staff Sgt. Michael Garcia, beat out 15 teams to win the SERE Challenge 2007 first-place Col. Bud Day trophy.

His steely gaze bores into the writhing mass of mealworms cupped in his hands. It's time for Staff Sgt. Steven Raethel to finish dinner.

The steel in his eyes matches the iron in his will as he pours 50-plus worms into his mouth. They cascade across his ivory teeth and pink gums. As the last of these tasty protein-filled morsels land into their final resting place, his mouth closes with a squishing crunch.

Despite the worms repeatedly biting his tongue and gums, Sergeant Raethel chews steadily as if his puffing cheeks held bubble gum instead of a viscous, writhing "dessert."

This is how someone survives when stranded in the middle of nowhere, and for Sergeant Raethel — a survival, evasion, resistance and escape specialist — surviving against the odds is what he does, and teaches others to do.

"When you are a SERE specialist you do what it takes," said Master Sgt. R.C. DeLano, a SERE specialist with the 336th Training Group at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash. "It's not about physical strength. We can make you stronger. It is about the strength of will to do what others cannot or will not do to overcome."

When it comes to the special training no one comes close to the Air Force, the instructors are quick to point out. The Air Force created SERE training at the end of the Korean War. Later, it branched out to the Army and Navy during the Vietnam War.

"We have some of the most challenging training in the world," said Staff Sgt. Matthew Zimmer, a SERE specialist and water survival instructor. "We push ourselves to be able to overcome any challenge — nothing can stop us."

To equip these Airmen warriors with the weapons to fight the unknown conditions in any environment they must overcome, they become experts at surviving in open water, deserts, the arctic, mountains — any harsh environment on the planet.

Training warfighters

SERE training is about surviving in a combat environment. And, these SERE warriors pass on their expertise to the Airmen warfighters of today and tomorrow. The Fairchild Airmen train more than 10,000 Air Force warriors each year.

Training is in three parts: Basic survival and evasion; resistance and escape; and water and arctic survival.

Survival and evasion skills include wilderness survival, first aid, land navigation, camouflage,

Survival, evasion, resistance and escape training is tough, as Staff Sgt. Brandon Klein found out when he repelled down Dirty Shirt Peak in Washington's Colville National Forest. A blister cost him and teammate, Staff Sgt. Steven Raethel, the SERE Challenge 2007 crown.



Parachute cord has many uses, like for tying together pieces of timber to build a raft. Raft building is one of the skills survival, evasion, resistance and escape Airmen must learn.

Pull-ups are a big part of the physical fitness test Airman 1st Class Tony Fancher and other Airmen had to do during the 2007 SERE Challenge at that gives the participants real-world survival training.



evading the enemy and constructing tools.

Resistance and escape training focuses on how to resist and survive after capture. These skills focus heavily on the experiences of Americans captured by the enemy. In water survival, students learn to apply first aid in an aquatic environment, ocean ecology and equipment maintenance — and to use aquatic survival gear. In arctic survival, students learn how to apply their basic survival-and-evasion skills in an austere environment in bone-chilling weather.

The goal: Learn to survive. That’s critical in today’s wartime environment. SERE training is so important that most of it is secret, Sergeant DeLano said.

“We’re preparing our folks for things the bad guys haven’t even thought of yet,” he said.

To keep their warfighting edge razor sharp, the schoolhouse tests its instructors. This year, instructors created a four-day, no-holds-barred test of knowledge, endurance and willpower for all “Guardian Angels” — a weapon system made up of people, not equipment. It is composed of combat rescue officers, pararescue and SERE specialists.

Fifteen two-man teams voluntarily went into the rugged mountains of Colville National Park for the 2007 SERE Challenge in June 2007. It was man against nature. Teams had to swim through bone-chilling, leech-infested waters. Scale sheer unforgiving rock faces. Hike mile after mile on swollen, blistered feet. And they had to eat things that would make a goat puke.

All while living up to their motto “Return with Honor.”

“This whole challenge was a lot like the familiarization phase of the training we all do. It’s one task after another with no rest,” Sergeant Zimmer said during the trial. “I am physically and mentally exhausted. We pushed ourselves really hard to take the lead and now we are pushing even harder to maintain it.”

Sergeant Zimmer and his partner, Staff Sgt. Michael Garcia, also a water survival instructor, conquered the mountains and the rest of the field to win the challenge.

But even with their years of expert training, five teams didn’t finish the challenge. Two teams didn’t make their checkpoints in time. And the other three had to withdraw against their wills due to severe blisters they had from the brutal marches and hikes.

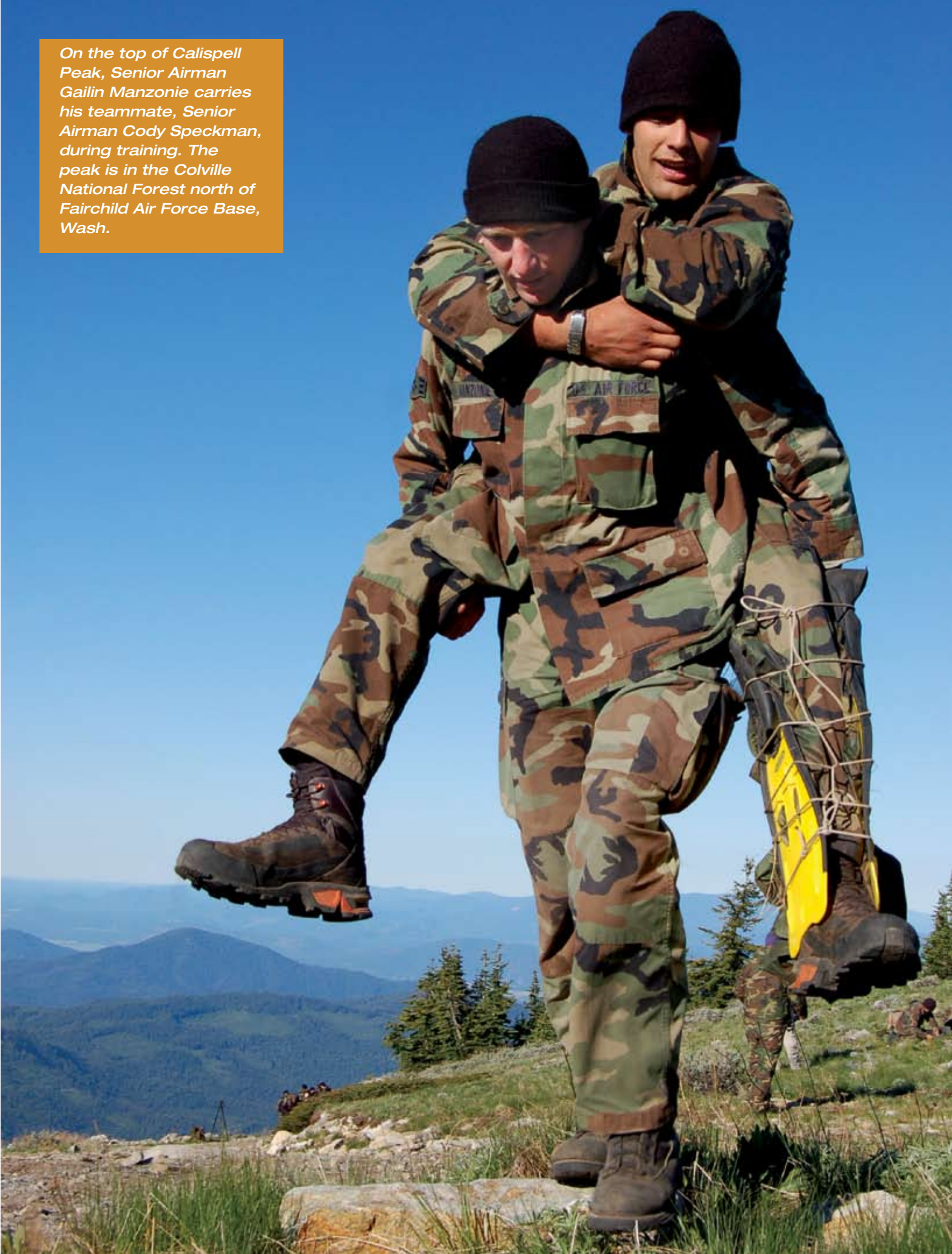
Staff Sgts. Brandon Klein and Steven Raethel were in sight of victory until a medic told Sergeant Klein he had the worst looking foot she had ever seen and that he couldn’t go on. However, the judges told Sergeant Raethel he could continue — alone.

But after battling fatigue, pain and choking down more than 50 mealworms, Sergeant Raethel didn’t hesitate to say no. His eyes told the story before his words could.

“You never leave a man behind,” he said. “I wouldn’t even think of crossing the finish line without my teammate.”

To a SERE specialist, returning with honor tops everything. So they learn. Survive. And continue the mission. 🦋

On the top of Calispell Peak, Senior Airman Gailin Manzonie carries his teammate, Senior Airman Cody Speckman, during training. The peak is in the Colville National Forest north of Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash.



A security forces Airman provides cover fire for other Airmen being “rescued” from capture during resistance training.